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AUTHOR Brenner, Marshall H.; Sigband, Norman B.
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ABSTRACT

This two-phase study examined communication style and practice in a major aerospace firm. First, sixty-five high-level company managers were interviewed to ascertain their views on communication problems and practices within the firm. Second, a questionnaire survey was distributed to 700 supervisors and non-supervisory personnel, soliciting opinions concerning the accuracy and adequacy of communication within the company, the timeliness of information communicated, and the nature of communications media used. Results indicated that: (1) managers higher in the structural hierarchy of an organization are better informed than those lower in the hierarchy; (2) communications to an employee are more effective when most of them come from his immediate superior and (3) subordinates keep their superiors better informed when both share a common frame of reference and when the superior is easily accessible to his subordinates. There was no apparent relationship between percentage of communications the subordinates received orally or in writing and how well informed the respondent perceived himself to be. (PK)

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION - AN ANALYSIS BASED ON EMPIRICAL DATA

By

Marshall H. Brenner, Assistant Professor

Norman B. Sigband, Professor

School of Business Administration

University of Southern California

Los Angeles, California 90007

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION - AN ANALYSIS BASED ON EMPIRICAL DATA

Corporate communications - both internal and external - probably receive more attention in companies than almost any other single topic or activity. Managers frequently discuss it, attend seminars devoted to it, and encounter several articles on the topic each month in their reading material. Communication is a popular topic because its problems are so common. Certainly almost every manager can provide a half dozen illustrations of communication difficulties which he has encountered within his own organization.

Although the literature presents various solutions, too often the prescriptions offered are the same regardless of the type of organization or management style which exists.

However, business organizations are different. Each is an individual entity, with its own combination of history, products, technology, organizational structure, managerial personnel, labor force, community, and climate. And because of this organizational uniqueness, firms have unique communication problems. Thus, corrective action must be designed with that organization's specific practices and environment in mind.

The authors feel that every organization develops a pattern which reflects the unique manner in which it sends, receives,

and processes information. It is a complex amalgam which may be referred to as an Organizational Communication Style (OCS).

The Research

The research reported in this paper was an effort to analyze the communication practices and style of one of the nation's major aerospace firms. It was also an effort to secure some empirical data on a large organization which is sorely lacking in the literature.*

The School of Business Administration of the University of Southern California and the aerospace company involved in the research have had a long working relationship based on seminars, management development programs, and employees involved in degree programs.

In the process of evaluation of management development programs, a number of members of the top management of the firm, indicated their continuing and significant concern with the quality of communication in the company. As a result of these comments, the University of Southern California Research Institute for Business and Economics and the company agreed to conduct jointly research on communication practices in the company.**

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* The Bank of America did complete a communication survey of 38,000 employees in 1970. Asides from this one survey, a recent analysis of major substance has not been found.

** Much of this paper is due to the guidance, ideas, and insight of Dr. Joseph W. Ehrenreich, Director, of the University of Southern California Research Institute for Business and Economics. Dr. Ehrenreich initiated the discussions with the aerospace firm involved, participated in the design of the project and its analysis, and offered valuable counsel throughout.

There were two specific steps in the research activity:

An interview survey concerned with executives' views on communication problems and practices company wide.

A questionnaire survey of approximately 700 managers dealing with their communications with superiors, subordinates and peers.

Survey One - The Executives' Point of View

In the first of the two studies a team of interviewers asked 65 managers, the majority from top management in the company, to describe their communication problems and to discuss different aspects of organizational communication.

These managers clearly identified the following topics as being of major concern.

1. Inter-organizational communication practices, especially at lower organizational levels,
2. Speed of communication, both vertically and horizontally,
3. Accuracy of vertical communication for messages traveling through more than one or two organizational levels, and
4. The organizational requirement that each executive have an extensive amount of information at his immediate command.

Using this exploratory study as a base, Study Two was undertaken to gather data on these same issues from a sample of lower level managers, supervisors, and non-supervisory personnel.

Survey Two

Using a variety of reference frames, a 41 item questionnaire was developed that dealt with the respondents' communication with three groups of personnel in the same and other departments of

the same company: superiors, subordinates, and peers. The questionnaire, primarily in multiple choice format, sought information on four major topics:

The accuracy of communications

The adequacy of communications

The timeliness of information and,

The media used.

Nearly 700 questionnaires were distributed to a sample of non-supervisory personnel and to members of first and second level supervision in seven functional areas of the company. These areas included marketing, finance, quality assurance, material and personnel. Four hundred and sixty-five usable questionnaires were returned, 124 from second level managers, 228 from first level supervision and 112 from a non-supervisory sample. The results discussed below are based on these responses.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Perceptions of Cooperation

The literature in the field states that most of the information in a hierarchal organization flows downward with consequent filtering at each level. It was not surprising, therefore, to find that the managers in this study felt significantly better informed about things they needed to know to do their jobs than did either the supervisors or non-supervisory personnel.

In the case of lateral communication, the supervisors perceived

greater difficulty than managers or non-supervisors. Only 59% of the responding supervisors stated they were able to obtain timley assistance always or almost always, while 71% of the managers or non-supervisors said they were. What's the reason?

Perhaps the supervisor does not have the "clout" the manager has when requesting assistance. Because of this the respondent may place the supervisor on a lower priority level when making responses. As for the success of the non-supervisor in securing assistance, perhaps that can be explained by the fact that he is not perceived as a threat to the respondent. Thus, cooperation is extended easily. It has been recognized that the first line supervisor is the "man in the middle" vertically;* our findings indicate that he may be in the same position laterally as well.

Who Gives the Orders?

In the study, respondents were asked, "What proportion of the assignments which you receive are given to you by your immediate superior?" The research hypothesis was that the great majority of people would get almost all of their assignments from their immediate superior. After all, that's what the "chain of command" and the organization chart are all about. However, that's not what was found in this company. More than 40% of those returning questionnaires said that less than half their

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* F. Mann and J. Dent, "The Supervisor: Member of Two Organizational Families," Harvard Business Review, Nov-Dec. 1954.

assignments were given to them by their immediate superior, and a full 25% said that only one quarter of their assignments came from him!

This leads immediately to the following question: Is communication better when it comes from an individual's immediate superior than when it comes from someone else? In this situation, it was. Those individuals who indicated that they received the greatest proportion of their assignments from their immediate superiors also said that:

They were better informed

They more frequently had adequate time to complete assignments

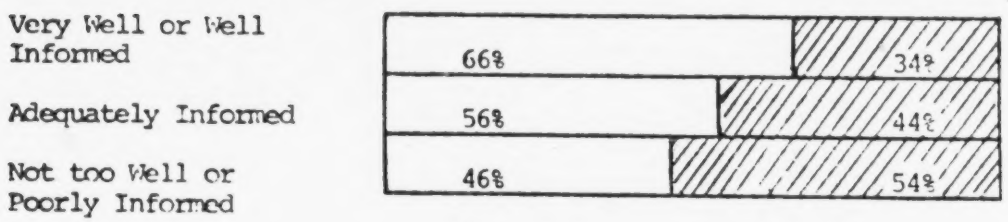
They were able to secure clarification of assignments more frequently

Their superiors were kept better informed, and,

Fewer assignments were delayed to the extent that job accomplishment was hampered.

Figure 1

Relationship Between Source of Assignments and Being Informed of Things Needed To Do the Job.



Respondents Receiving Majority of Assignments from Superior.

Respondents Receiving Majority of Assignments from someone other than Superior.

Why is communication from the immediate superior more effective?

There are at least two reasons:

1. The immediate superior controls the recipients' reward system; therefore, the immediate superior is more likely to receive the subordinate's serious and undivided attention when he communicates an assignment.

2. Because the superior-subordinate communication channel is used more frequently than others, the superior and subordinate develop a degree of "role understanding" that the subordinate does not have with other persons. In time, the subordinate develops through feedback processes, a picture of what the superior wants, how the superior will use the information, the demands the superior is attempting to meet, etc. In short, the subordinate develops a stable picture of the "role" of the superior and responds with that role understanding in mind.

Assignments - Should They be Made Orally or in Writing?

Although communications researchers have proved that accuracy and precision of content are at a lower level when messages are transmitted orally than when sent in writing, we found that almost 70% of the respondents indicated that over 75% of the assignments they received from their superiors were given to them orally. And most respondents indicated their preference for oral instructions. Representative of comments on this score were:

> "I'm so busy, I do not have time to write up every little assignment. And besides it just doesn't 'pay' to do it because many are of minor importance, difficulty, or priority."

Still another justification is:

> "When I give an assignment orally, I get immediate feedback. And this permits me to make immediate corrections."

In this study the managers indicated overwhelmingly that they preferred to communicate orally. This, in spite of the fact that the literature supports written as being much more effective. However, we could find no relationship between how well informed the respondent perceived himself to be, and the proportion of written or oral communications which he received.

How Can Effective Subordinate To Superior Communication be Secured?

Authorities have often cited the difficulty which exists in securing open, accurate, and complete communications from subordinate to superior.*

There is perhaps no one factor which bothers managers more than this problem of securing accurate feedback. Securing this honest intelligence from subordinates is vital if superiors are to make accurate decisions, have an appreciation of the climate "below," and know something about the level of morale which exists among their subordinates.

But how can this be secured?

Our second study revealed some answers. The superior was kept better informed by his subordinates when:

The superior told the subordinate what ~~will~~ was to be done with completed assignments,

The superior previously held the subordinate's position,

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* Jackson, Jay M. - The Organization and Its Communication Problem, Advance Management Journal, (Feb. 1959) pp. 17-20.

McMurray, Robert N. - "Clear Communications for Chief Executives," Harvard Business Review, (Mar.-Apr. 1965) pp. 131-145.

The immediate superior is the one making the largest proportion of assignments to the subordinate and,

The subordinate feels he can secure clarification of the assignment from his immediate superior.

Table 1

Relationship Between Being Able to Obtain Clarification of Assignments and Keeping Superiors Informed

Of those respondents who said their peers kept their superiors:	This percentage said desired clarification could be obtained from their superiors:			
	Always	Almost Always	Most of The Time	Seldom; Never
Very Well Informed	42%	35%	18%	5%
Fairly Well Informed	24%	40%	31%	5%
Not Too Well Informed	7%	26%	52%	15%

There would appear to be nothing terribly new here, and yet these practices are not always carried through. Perhaps what is needed is emphasis and repetition of basic principles:

When people know what will be done with their ideas, they are more open in discussion.

When superior and subordinate both held the same job, their perceptions are similar, and communication is facilitated.

Firms should therefore recognize that when individuals are transferred into positions where perceptions of superior - subordinate are not similar, action is needed. This might consist of orientation programs, discussions, or simple exchanges of ideas between superior - subordinate.

Conclusion

The data gathered in this study provide empirical support for some of the principles generally stated in the classroom and recorded in the literature. They support, for example, the following:

1. Managers higher in the structural hierarchy of an organization are better informed than those lower in the same hierarchy.

2. Communications to an employee are more effective when most of them come from his immediate superior rather than other persons, and

3. Subordinates keep their superiors informed better when the superior tells the subordinate what will be done with his work, when they share a common frame of reference, and when the superior makes himself available to his subordinates.

On the other hand, the study revealed some surprising findings that were unexpected and that would benefit from further attention:

1. Supervisors had more difficulty obtaining assistance than either their superiors or their subordinates did. Further study needs to focus on the following questions:

   Are they asking for more information?
   More sensitive information?
   Are the time requirements of supervisors more restricted, causing them to be more demanding?
   Or is it their power position within the authority structure?

2. No relationship was obtained between the percentage of communications the subordinates received orally or in writing and how well informed the respondent perceived himself to be. This raises a number of provocative questions. Does the specific job determine the mode of communication that will be most effective? Does the manager select that mode at which he is most adept? Do a manager's subordinates learn to adapt to his mode of communication?

These findings were obtained in just one organization at one point in time and provide information about that organization's Organizational Communication Style at that time. In order to examine the author's assumption about the uniqueness of an organization's Communication Style and communication problems, the generality of these findings should be examined by conducting similar studies in other organizations. Only then will we learn whether these findings apply to a wide variety of organizations or whether they apply only to certain kinds of organizations under specific conditions.